

# Motivation Through Competition?

by Joseph R. Bainbridge

Americans historically have enjoyed taking part in all kinds of competition. Occupations and recreational activities routinely are based on trying to exceed a standard or beat out competitors. The free market system depends on competition to improve products and lower prices.

Competition is prevalent in basic childhood activities such as tossing a ball (hand-eye coordination) or learning to spell. As children mature, they must compete with siblings, fellow students, and others for opportunities to play on the school team, enter college, or even date desirable people. Long ago, military leaders found they could motivate their soldiers to achieve higher levels of performance or endurance if a competitive environment was established and the winner rewarded.

In his book, *A General's Insights Into Leadership and Motivation*, Major General Charles R. Henry (U.S. Army, retired) observed that there is only about a 5-percent difference between winning and losing in both athletics and business. Contests are often so close that a photograph examination or some sort of tie breaker is necessary to determine the winner. Yet the loser is deprived of significant recognition for his effort.

## Military Competition

U.S. servicemembers seldom fight valiantly for "causes," abstract sociopolitical values, or extra hazardous-duty pay. They fight to survive, for a leader they know and are committed to, and for their fellow soldiers to whom they are bonded by common circumstances. American military professionals achieve high levels of effectiveness because of overwhelming allegiance to a group and its leader. A powerful factor during the development of group identity is competition. Soldiers compete individually and, more importantly, as members of teams against mental and physical obstacles or other soldiers (friend or foe).

The military uses competition to motivate servicemembers and to make important decisions. Two Services may compete for a mission functional area or assignment. A higher level of execution may be achieved

because the "group" is a more important entity than the "self." For example, the winning group in a contest may be granted liberty by the commander while the losers must remain on station.

A study conducted by the Navy Personnel Research and Development Center concluded that, in Navy technical schools, competition (performance comparison to other students) correlated closely to achievement.

The United States has encouraged competition as a motivator among the Services, and among major factions within them, for many years. The pride and parochialism often has manifested itself as extra effort toward notable achievements. Many long-standing commands have a heritage of great accomplishments and associated pride, often based on a comparison to the performance of similar elements (competitors) during battles. The Army has an Institute of Heraldry to document these records.

Fierce Service pride, rivalry, and competition continue to have positive outcomes today. However, we are changing rapidly to a single integrated force in the theater. In future operations, one military Service will provide selected common support to most or all forces in an area. That supporting Service cannot give preference to its own elements. The Defense Logistics Agency is assuming more of the logistics support role every year, including during hostilities. The next operation likely will be directed by a joint task force commander.

## Undesirable Effects of Competition

The simplified goal of any operation may be to neutralize enemy personnel. A commander decides to motivate his soldiers by establishing a competition with a desirable reward for the most enemy personnel neutralized. A soldier could struggle, take prudent risks, neutralize 13 enemy troops, and hope that no one else exceeded that number (a good outcome for the commander). He also could determine who his closest competitors were, take actions to lessen their success, and win with five enemy troops neutralized (not as good an outcome for the commander). In the latter situation, the



"defending" part of the contest (preventing the opponent from succeeding or scoring) is a negative aspect of motivation using competition.

In an article in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, Jennifer A. Epstein and Judith M. Harackiewicz demonstrated that competition has the potential to both enhance and reduce interest. When people focus on winning to the exclusion of intrinsic aspects of the task, competition may undermine interest in the task. Having to compete with others who are perceived to be superior performers can discourage competitors to the point that they withdraw their entry. In coalition operations or industrial-base product development, a decision not to participate could have a very undesirable impact.

I have observed officers taking an advanced training course where scores on tests accumulated toward a success threshold. Near the end of the course, three groups could be identified: a large group of rather carefree "I have enough points" people, a smaller group of hard-working "I need more points" people, and a very small group of totally unmotivated "I can't get there, I give up," people. Only the second group is still benefiting from the competition for points. By the last week of the course, there aren't any people in this group, and there is very little intrinsic motivation evident either.

Consider some negative aspects of competition—

- To be motivated, a participant must perceive a chance to win or at least to have a good outcome. Once defeat is inevitable, the motivation is gone.
- Pooling or combining knowledge and capabilities among competitors to achieve even greater success is unlikely.
- Competition may cause resentment toward competitors that continues well past the conclusion of competition. Revenge for the loss may be sought.
- Intended or not, the results of competition will be interpreted as A is the best, therefore B, C, and D are less than the best.

Team members tend to "take care" of teammates before others. This may be acceptable in some circumstances but can be undesirable in others. Competitors may choose to lessen the success of their rivals rather than improve their own performance.

### Alternatives to Competition

It may be time to replace much of the competition-oriented behavior in the Army with an evaluation system based on efficient and effective advancement of Department of Defense initiatives. To continue to foster a "we can beat them" attitude toward other servicemembers with whom we work and upon whom we depend may produce an unfavorable end state.

Modern people-management and leadership books, such as *Mission Possible* by Ken Blanchard and Terry Waghorn, or *The Key to Great Leadership* by Peter

Burwash, emphasize empowerment of capable individuals and development of core competencies in natural leaders and the "talent" they direct. Vested interests and critical roles on the team are what motivate the people. A "beat your fellow worker" approach, with points awarded for completed tasks, is noticeably absent from these guidebooks. Finding an employee's value is stressed instead of forcing a temporary high performance.

Engaging in a task for the sake of performing the task is a powerful motivation. This is the intrinsic motivation mentioned earlier. It offers the individual an opportunity to satisfy inner needs. Cognitive evaluation theory assumes that two components are necessary for a favorable outcome. One is believing that you are competent or capable; the other is perceiving self-determination. Self-determination in a military context is difficult to assess. Servicemembers choose to serve and often volunteer for challenging assignments. Yet they often are compelled to perform a specific mission in a certain way when neither the assignment nor the method is what they might have chosen. Competition often affirms one's competence. Competitions that stress beating opponents reduce intrinsic motivation, because identifying losers cannot be avoided in such competitions.

### Focus on Desired End State

Some contests are, and should be, conducted specifically to find "the winner." However, in situations where everyone must contribute his best, success certainly is not achieved by proclaiming one winner and many losers. Logistics cooperation or departmental interaction may be affected adversely because of the inevitable feelings instilled in those who do not "win." In the military, if more peaceful actions fail, we want to defeat the enemy, not a competing servicemember, unit, Service, or agency of our Government.

Recreational competition is fun. Comparative competition to choose the best product or provider is useful. Competition among those working toward a common goal may not be wise. The motivation to fight in future joint environments must be intrinsic and not rely on comparisons to other elements pursuing the same goals for the same joint force commander. The Department of Defense is blending together now for more efficiency. Tomorrow's joint task force members will have to be inspired to perform by their leaders, not by competition.

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